



The writer has served in the active and reserve components of the armed forces. His e-mail address is w\_minami@hotmail.com.

# When purchasing bombs and jets, 'buy American' is insurance policy

I've never thought much of the "buy American" ads that float across my TV screen from time to time. They've struck me as ham-handed attempts to convince the public it is patriotic to buy mediocre merchandise at premium prices instead of holding manufacturers' feet to the fire and making them improve their product.

Besides, in today's global economy it's almost impossible for the average consumer to know offhand where a given item was made. I drive a Nissan, which has a plant in Tennessee, while my neighbor has a Ford, which assembles vehicles in Mexico and Canada.

Rather than prop up an inferior product because it has an American-sounding name, I go with whichever has the best combination of quality and value and let the chips fall where they may.

Likewise, Pentagon officials have sought for years to break free of "buy American" legal provisions in order to get the most for their procurement dollar. Under federal law, a variety of items — including food and clothing —

must be domestically produced in order for the Defense Department to be able to purchase them. These rules not only force the Pentagon to ignore more-affordable foreign products, they sometimes hurt American producers that are unable to meet the stringent requirements of domestic-content laws.

Given my personal shopping habits, you'd probably suspect that I'm all for consigning these laws to the circular file, and for certain easily produced items, such as clothing, you'd be right. But there's one key difference between consumer spending and national-defense procurement: If our nation's Hula Hoop makers go out of business because they can't compete with foreign Hula Hoop makers, the practical effect is essentially nil. But if all of our fighter plane manufacturers go out of business, the nation's ability to obtain a key tool of national defense is essentially held hostage to the whims of the governments — and corporate boards — from which they are obtained.

In an interview with Congress-

sional Quarterly Weekly, Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, pointed out that during the action in Iraq, a Swiss company refused to supply critical components for American Global Positioning System-guided Joint Direct Attack Munitions simply because its officials did not agree with American policy in Iraq.

While I understand the value of loosening "buy American" procurement rules in terms of cost savings, I'm concerned about our nation maintaining access to the tools it needs to defend itself. As Germany's actions during the Iraq campaign amply demonstrate, sometimes even close allies cannot be relied upon. One can only imagine the difficulties we might have had if the JDAM had been a German-made product.

But there's a fine line between ensuring the U.S. maintains the ability to domestically produce key pieces of hardware and burdening the system with rules that amount to little more than pork barrel spending. The idea the United States will, for example, lose its

ability to produce food or clothing if military contracts go to foreign manufacturers is ludicrous.

The United States needs to maintain some level of capability to produce military equipment and components. I'm not saying every bullet, bean and battery must come from U.S. manufacturers, but we need to have the capability to increase production rapidly of key materials at home when overseas sources dry up, and you can't do that when your domestic production capacity has fallen to zero.

If an important weapon or component is available only from a foreign source, a domestic manufacturer needs to be found as well, even if the price is higher. I'm not suggesting that we cancel foreign contracts, just that we have a matching capacity at home. But domestic manufacturers shouldn't have a monopoly on defense contracts for easily produced, commonly available merchandise.

In short, there needs to be a balance.

It isn't about patriotism and it isn't about pork. It's about maintaining an effective and affordable national defense. Most of all, it's about preventing corporate executives in Switzerland and elsewhere from having a veto on American foreign policy. □